



Tennessee Department of Transportation

Kim Keelor
615.741.9930 (o) 615.356.4044 (h) 615.741.9093 (f)

Tennessee Department of Safety

Melissa McDonald
615.251.5131 (o) 888.220.4791 (p) 615.253.2091 (f)

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MERGE LEFT WORK ZONE SAFETY CAMPAIGN BEGINS ***TDOT's new plan to improve traffic flow and safety at highway projects***

Nashville, Tenn—Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) announced a new highway work zone program yesterday, April 4, 2005 that is designed to improve traffic flow and safety in construction areas. The plan is called Merge Left.

"It is a simple concept for drivers, but one that we hope will save lives and help relieve construction related backups on our highways and interstates," said TDOT Commissioner Gerald Nicely. "We will be designing the entrances of many new work zones to flow to the left. This will create consistency throughout the state. Drivers will know which way to go, and what to expect. Merge left and merge early."

TDOT unveiled the new program with the assistance of the Department of Safety at five simultaneous news conferences yesterday. The news conferences were held in Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, Nashville, and in the Tri-Cities area as part of National Work Zone Safety Awareness Week, which is April 3-9.

"Your actions in a work zone can make a dramatic difference in your safety and in the safety of others. That's why we have stepped up our patrols at all interstate work zones this week," said Department of Safety Commissioner Fred Phillips. "Speeding traffic is the number one cause of injury and death in our nation's work zones. So simply slow down, and when you are instructed, merge left, and merge early....paying attention to the merge left signs will help keep you safe and help you avoid getting a ticket."

According to TDOT, in the last four years, 120 people have lost their lives in highway work zone crashes in Tennessee. TDOT's new Merge Left projects will get underway individually in the next few months.

"One thing that the Merge Left program does is reduce opportunities for that last-minute merger who makes many drivers so angry. There is a specific sign in the layout that can involve a ticket if drivers have failed to merge by that point," explained Paul Degges, TDOT's Chief Engineer. "Collisions can result from a driver trying to merge at the last possible moment, and for every second one car is forced to slow or stop for a last-minute merger the entire line of traffic behind it gets delayed multiple times over."

Here's how Merge Left works:

1. At the very first highway sign advising of an upcoming work zone, begin merging to the left lane as quickly as possible. Do not try to gain position by speeding ahead in the right lane.
2. Get in single file with all other vehicles in the left lane.
3. Stay in single file until you are through the work zone.
4. Begin to merge back into all traffic lanes.

"Tennessee's road builders are very supportive of the Merge Left concept. We believe it will help reduce congestion in our work zones and save lives," said Bill Ratliff, President of Tennessee Asphalt Company and immediate past president of the Tennessee Road Builders Association. "Merge Left will reduce motorist confusion in work zones and eliminate frustrations as to which lane ahead is closed."

For a printable Merge Left brochure, go to the TDOT web site media room at www.tennessee.gov